

SARAH CANNISTRA

LAND YOUR NEXT L&D ROLE



**Creating a Career
That Works for You**

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Introduction

“Change is inevitable. But transformation is a choice.”

—Heather Ash Amara

My L&D career almost ended before it even began.

Like many millennials, I started working in my teens. I’ve always had a propensity toward the service and sales industries—from working in restaurants to phone sales to retail to fundraising. I found myself drawn toward helping people, but like most 20 year olds, I had no idea what that meant for my long-term career.

I decided to study psychology at the University of Central Florida. I enjoyed my classes but was struggling to pay rent. My apartment community offered a rent discount as an employment perk, so my mom encouraged me to apply for a sales associate position. Begrudgingly (because I thought I knew everything and didn’t need my mom’s advice—spoiler alert, mom is always right), I applied for the job and within a few weeks was hired full-time.

Prior to this, I’d only held part-time, odds-and-ends jobs, so I’d never experienced a formal onboarding process. I had no idea what to expect as I walked into the corporate office on my first day. My orientation was a whirlwind—learning about the real estate industry, the company’s core values, and what had made the organization successful for the past few decades. Divisional leaders who started as associates shared their journeys and success stories. We ate lunch together, learned about everyone’s backgrounds, and shared pictures of the properties we were going to work at—promising to visit one another in the coming weeks. We laughed, we learned, and we developed an overwhelming sense of connection to one another and the organization—all in just eight short hours. More than 15 years later, I can *still* think back and feel that sense of excitement coursing through me as I left the office to begin my new career.

As the onboarding process continued—complete with job shadowing, mentorship, and on-the-job training—I became more and more confident in my new role, very quickly rising to the top of the sales boards for not only our region, but the entire country. I immersed myself in learning sales techniques, becoming a product expert, and uncovering how to deliver the best possible client experience. For the first time in my life, I felt I was on the right career path, with each step carefully laid out in front of me.

That was, until I experienced my first in-person training session.

I'll never forget the moment I first saw Steve Wunch. A regional trainer at the time, Steve was responsible for hosting the company's sales rallies for regional sales associates. This quarterly event gave us the chance to celebrate the past quarter and engage in a half-day of learning experiences to propel us into the next quarter.

When Steve got on the microphone, the energy in the room became electric. All eyes were on him—everyone was engaged and actively participating with the sales topic he was presenting. He made us laugh, he challenged us, and he left us feeling confident in applying this new information back on the job. I can't remember what we learned about that day—it might have been closing techniques or objection handling. What I do remember was the feeling I had the moment Steve stepped on the stage. I felt a shift that would change the trajectory of my career when I realized that this, what Steve was doing, was what I wanted to do one day.

And while I wish I could tell you I became a trainer overnight (which I did, a few years later), that experience only marked the *beginning* of my journey toward training.

I left the rally and went back to work. Because I kept exceeding my sales targets, the company asked me to help train and mentor new sales associates. I eventually joined a competing organization and was promoted into a leadership role. As a sales manager, I spent most of my time hosting sales training sessions for my teams, creating process documents and manuals, recording videos on how to use new technologies, and providing one-on-one coaching and mentorship. Without even recognizing it, my L&D career was starting to take shape—just without the formal title, training, or experience.

Then, I enrolled in a two-day leadership development program that my company's newly formed learning and leadership department was piloting. Seeing the facilitator, Genevieve, command the room in the same way Steve had done at that rally years earlier reignited my fire for a career in training.

At the end of the two days, I approached Genevieve and the head of the learning and leadership team, Steven. I shared my desire to get into training, asking for their advice and if there was anything I could do to start moving the needle forward in my L&D career journey. They shared a speaking look, turned back to me, and asked me if I'd be open to becoming a software trainer. Without hesitation, I said yes. This time I became a trainer, overnight.

Of course, I was now doing software training *in addition* to my sales manager role. But the more I immersed myself in teaching and training, the more I knew I wanted to make it my full-time career.

And then it happened. The weekly company-wide internal job posting email hit my inbox, and at the very top was an opening for a corporate trainer. This was it! It was time to fully transition into learning and development. I was jumping for joy as I read through the job description, only to have my heart plummet when I saw this line: *Bachelor's degree required*.

A few months after beginning my career in sales, I had decided to withdraw from college. I realized I wasn't passionate about studying psychology and found it challenging to work a full-time job while attending school. At the time, it was the middle of the 2008 financial crisis, and my friends were having trouble finding work even with their degrees. So, I made the decision to focus entirely on my career—and that choice had served me well, up until that moment. Once I saw those words written so plainly on the job description, I was devastated. I didn't qualify—so I didn't apply and tucked away my dreams of an L&D career.

A few weeks later, Jeanette, the L&D coordinator at the time (who went on to become one of the most talented instructional design professionals I know), pulled me aside and said Steven wanted to meet with me in his office. "This is it," I thought, gutted. "They filled the corporate trainer position and are letting me go."

As I sat in the chair on the other side of Steven's desk, I was not prepared for the question he asked me. "Why didn't you apply for the corporate trainer position?" In fact, I think I nearly fainted, but the shame I'd been harboring about dropping out of college quickly brought me back to reality.

Looking down at my fidgeting hands, I said quietly, "I really wanted to, but the role requires a college degree, and I don't have one."

Steven shifted in his seat and then he let out a bark of laughter. What?! As if the situation could get any worse! Someone I greatly admired, who I would do anything to work for, was laughing at me.

But he wasn't laughing at me; he was laughing with a sense of relief—relief for me. "You've already been doing the job as a sales manager and systems trainer," he said with a big smile on his face. "I'd much prefer to have someone who knows the company, the culture, and is a subject matter expert over someone with a degree."

He saw what I didn't, and at that time couldn't, see—my transferable skill set and how it prepared me for my dream role. To Steven, it wasn't about the degrees I didn't have or the titles I'd held—the unique set of skills I'd gained from my experience made me the right person for the role.

After that conversation, I formally applied for the job and went through the interview process. Within weeks, I officially transitioned to my role as a corporate trainer. A few years later, I became the company's first director of corporate training. Then, I went back to school for a degree in organizational leadership and learning before leading the L&D functions at three more organizations. Eventually, I decided to embark on an entrepreneurial journey to help L&D professionals find, land, and thrive in the L&D career of their dreams, just as I had.

My journey wasn't straightforward—there were twists and turns, I suffered from imposter syndrome and self-doubt, and there was even a several month stint when I left the field completely. In fact, as I write this book, I'm in the thick of another professional transformation. In many ways, putting pen to paper is cathartic. It's been a self-reflective way to share the experiments, models, and tools that more than 1,000 of my clients have used in the last four years and that I've used over the past few months.

This book is designed to be transformative and to guide you on your L&D career journey, no matter the stage you're in. You are in the right place if you are:

- Just beginning your L&D career or considering a transition into L&D
- Ready to advance in your L&D career or try a new type of role inside the field
- Realizing your work environment no longer aligns with your core values and are looking for a new role inside a new company
- Looking to set yourself up for success inside your current organization in preparation for a promotion
- Recently laid off, unemployed, or underemployed and looking to find your next stable L&D role

We're in an incredible time for learning and development. The artificial intelligence (AI) revolution is upon us, and while many fear it will take away jobs, I believe that it's going to create so many new opportunities for our field. After decades, we're finally being invited to the table inside many organizations, and we're leading the charge internally on skill development and talent mobility. L&D budgets are growing, even during recent periods of economic uncertainty, and we're seeing more and more traditional and nontraditional L&D roles hit the job market than ever before.

There has never been a better time to invest in your own L&D career than right now.

This book will challenge many ideas and practices you've learned about finding and building a career in talent development. It will require you to have an open mind and, frankly, an open heart. It will also require you to reflect on your career so far and envision what's possible for you in the future. It will test you again and again, but in return, you'll gain clarity, confidence, and competence.

You picked up this book for a reason. I encourage you to use it to its fullest to rewrite the narrative of your career and transform it into the L&D career of your dreams.

PART 1

Laying the Foundation for Your L&D Career





Chapter 1

The 4 L&D Career Success Codes

“I never dreamed about success, I worked for it.”

—Estee Lauder

If you picked up this book, you’re probably looking for the best strategy to find and land your next L&D role. Everyone (and their mother and brother and sister) has likely shared their strategies to “guarantee” you’ll land a new role. I can also bet you’re feeling a little overwhelmed by the thought of “Frankensteining” all those strategies into something that actually works for you.

I’ll let you in on a secret: There is no one-size-fits-all strategy.

We all have different lived experiences, personalities, ways of working, and communication styles. While one person thrives in an environment where they are meeting and connecting with new people every day, someone else may find that utterly terrifying. Where one person might successfully create original content to land their dream role, another person may find success through a referral from a small community of like-minded peers.

The adage “one person’s trash is another person’s treasure,” can also be applied to the strategy you adopt to find and land your dream L&D role. What worked for someone on the internet may not work for you—in fact, it could actually hinder your progress. The more you take bits and pieces from other people’s career transition strategy, the further away you’ll be from what feels good to you. If it doesn’t feel aligned, or feels forced, there’s a high likelihood you won’t find success in that strategy.

The ABCDs of Career Success

So, we've established that each person's approach should be unique to their own experience. But what about their strategy? As I've coached clients through their job searches, I've found that certain patterns of activities led my clients to land higher quality roles in a significantly shorter timeframe than the average L&D job seeker. And, the more they align these specific strategies to their own unique experiences, the more successful they are.

I call these strategies the L&D Career Success Codes, or the ABCDs. Let's take a look at each one:

- **A (alignment).** This success code involves gaining clarity about your career goals. You want to determine what role is right for you, based on your skills and interests (or your L&D niche, which we'll define in chapter 4). You're also identifying the type of company values to target (more on this in chapters 3 and 4) and creating career transition materials, such as your resume, cover letter or CV, and portfolio (if needed) that speak to your ideal role.
- **B (branding).** This success code involves creating a personal and professional brand and crafting your story. Your brand is what others say about you when you're not in the room and it can work passively for you, whereas other success codes require more active attention. You'll focus on optimizing your LinkedIn profile, website, content, and portfolio to reflect what you want, how you want to do it, and who you want to do it for.
- **C (community).** This success code goes beyond networking for the sake of networking; here the focus is on spending time intentionally building community around your L&D niche. It is all about being in the room where it happens and finding people you can leverage, learn from, and lean on. You may want to join associations, group coaching programs, memberships, LinkedIn groups, and so on. Remember, it's not about the quantity of people you are connected with, but rather, the quality.

- **D (development).** This success code has two subcategories:
 - *Professional development* involves doing a gap analysis so you can start to understand where you need to upskill and create a plan to do so, without overdeveloping yourself. You'll want to focus on developing key skills, rather than collecting courses and certifications for the sake of having them.
 - *Personal development* involves focusing on your mindset and developing sustainable habits, hobbies, systems, and strategies to build your resilience and improve your relationship with yourself. This might be the most underrated piece of the success codes. Without a direct focus on your own internal belief systems and self-care, the process for developing into your next role will be long, arduous, and unstable.

When it comes time to adopt the ABCDs, there are three *very important* things to remember:

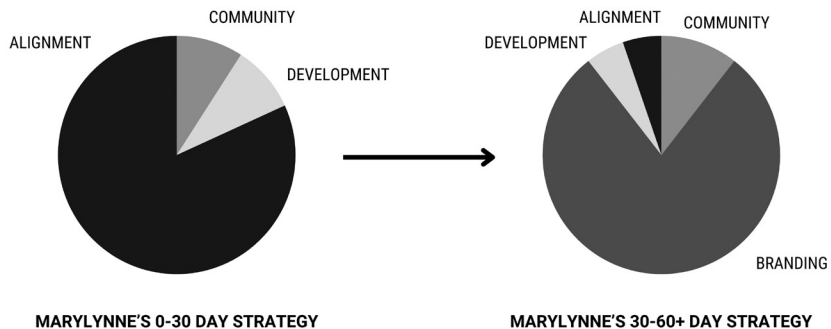
- You don't have to operate evenly in all four success codes.
- You don't have to focus on all four success codes at the same time.
- Your success codes strategy can (and most likely will) evolve as you progress through the job search.

The Success Codes in Action

Let's take a look at three real-life examples:

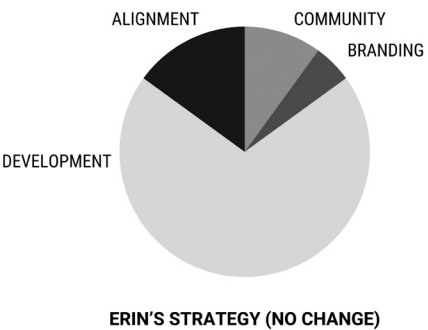
Meet Marylynne: When Marylynne (a former educator) came to me, she was feeling defeated, not like herself, and very "communitied"-out. A member of several L&D career transition communities, Marylynne had fallen into the trap of applying every piece of one-off advice to her career transition. So, when we started working together, she opted to focus on the alignment success code. Marylynne initially put 90 percent of her effort into finding her L&D niche and developing a niche-aligned resume and cover letter. Then, once her resume and cover letter authentically represented her unique set of skills, interests, and values, she shifted her strategy to focus more on her personal brand and aligning that to her newly discovered niche (Figure 1-1).

Figure 1-1. Marylynnne’s Career Transition Strategy



Meet Erin: When Erin (a former learning program director) and I first started working together, she was trying to find a new job after being part of a tech company’s reduction of force. Despite having dual master’s degrees and decades of experience, her rejection letters were piling up and her confidence was taking a major dip. She had resorted to applying to any and all roles—including ones she was overqualified for. Once we began working together, we identified Erin’s unique L&D niche and focused her strategy on rebuilding her confidence through personal development (Figure 1-2). Erin also realized that her network didn’t quite align with her niche, so she set out to create a community of people with the same career passions who she could leverage, learn from, and lean on. Eventually this network led Erin to a referral—which turned into a dream job offer.

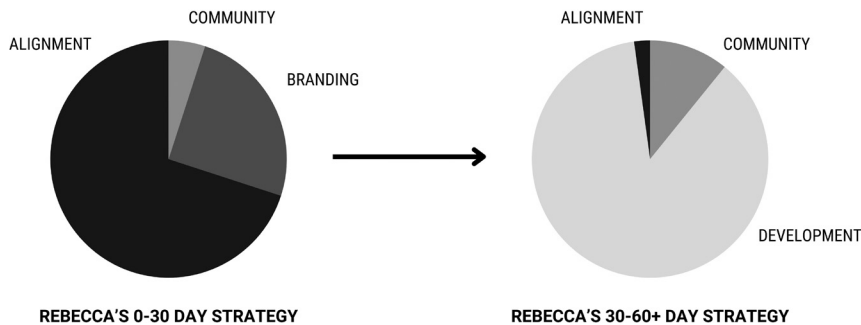
Figure 1-2. Erin’s Career Transition Strategy



Meet Rebecca: Before Rebecca (a former university senior lecturer) and I began working together, she was hiding parts of her skill set to showcase what she thought hiring managers wanted to see—effectively blending in with every other candidate out there. When we peeled back the layers to determine what skills she actually wanted to use in her next role, Rebecca realized she wanted to use both her artistic skills (she’s a digital artist) and

her research background (she was an MIT doctoral researcher). By combining those two skill sets, we found her L&D niche and crafted a resume around it. Rebecca quickly landed a first-round interview for her dream L&D job, thanks in part to her unique collection of skills. As she progressed through the interview process, Rebecca switched gears to focus on her own development (Figure 1-3). Leaning heavily on her research background, Rebecca decided to grow her skill sets in L&D data analytics and visualization. A few months later, she had two job offers in hand and landed the L&D role of her dreams.

Figure 1-3. Rebecca’s Career Transition Strategy



As you can see, strategies may shift over time or stay consistent, depending on each individual’s situation. Marylynn’s and Rebecca’s strategies both shifted around the 30-day mark, whereas Erin’s stayed mostly the same throughout her L&D career transition journey.

Marylynn had been putting together a piecemeal strategy for over a year before we started working together, so she needed that initial focus on alignment. She took the time necessary to find out what she actually wanted, rather than focusing on what her old community thought she should want. Once Marylynn felt aligned, she could focus on what most excited her—building a personal brand around her newly aligned L&D niche.

Rebecca was still relatively new to the career transition journey, so she didn’t know what she didn’t know and was falling into the trap of blending in. We needed to shift her focus to understanding how all parts of her skill set could come together as a unique niche. Once Rebecca determined her niche, she was able to identify a few small skills gaps and create a professional development plan to close them.

Erin's strategy remained relatively unchanged during our entire time working together. We knew the key to success would be building her confidence incrementally so she could believe and articulate with ease the value she would bring to her dream L&D role.

How to Know Where to Start

These are just a few examples of how my clients have successfully used the ABCDs as a framework to land their L&D roles. The possibilities are endless for how you could use them in your own career journey.

If you're wondering where to start, ask yourself these questions:

- Can you clearly articulate what you want to do next, how you want to do it, and who you want to do it for?
- Do you have a resume that aligns with that vision?
- Do your job search materials showcase your skills, interests, and values?

If you answered no to any of those questions, I recommend starting with the alignment success code. Without alignment, it will be challenging to understand and use the rest of the success codes.

If you answered yes to those questions, you're ready to explore the other success codes. Here are a few more questions to help clarify your direction:

- On a scale from 1 to 10, how confident are you in your ability to find and land your next L&D role?
 - If you answered lower than a seven, I encourage you to explore the chapters on the personal development success code (particularly chapters 2, 3, and 5). If you don't have confidence in your own abilities, it will be difficult for others, especially those in a hiring position, to be confident in your abilities.
- What five words do you want people to think of when they look at your LinkedIn profile, website, blog, or other online presence? When you're not in the room, what five words do you want people to say about the work you do? Does your current personal brand reflect this?
 - If you aren't sure or don't think your personal brand reflects what you want others to see, you might start by focusing on the branding success code and its related chapters. Your online

presence serves as a passive and relatively easy way to attract and receive job opportunities. You want to make sure that anyone passing by your brand will clearly understand what you bring to the table and what you're capable of doing for their organization.

- Do you have a group of L&D peers you can leverage, learn from, and lean on?
 - If you answered no I suggest focusing on the community success code and its related chapters. Build a network of people who share a similar alignment with you. This can be as simple as fostering a handful of strong one-on-one connections, finding a talent development networking group, or joining your local ATD chapter.
- Have you performed a skills gap assessment on yourself recently? Do you know which areas you'll need to upskill and develop to reach your L&D career goals?
 - If you answered no I suggest focusing on creating a professional development plan by focusing on the development success code and its related chapters (particularly chapter 3). Remember, a collection of arbitrary certifications and courses is not the same as aligning your specific areas of focus with your L&D career goals. You want to be intentional with this area, especially because it requires an investment of your time, money, and energy.

Depending on how you answered these questions, you may want to focus on one, two, three, or even all four success codes. If one or two areas are really calling to you, I encourage you to start there first, and then work your way through the others. Use Table 1-1 as a quick guide to target the chapters that are most relevant to your success codes of choice.

Table 1-1. L&D Career Success Codes: Chapter Matrix

Success Codes	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Alignment	x	x	x	x	x	x		
Branding						x	x	
Community							x	x
Development	x	x		x				

Success Codes	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Alignment			x	x	x	x	x
Branding	x		x	x	x		x
Community	x	x					x
Development	x						x

Another way to look at using the success codes is time allocation. If you’ve decided to focus on multiple success codes, you may want to start by assigning percentages to each one. Let’s return to Marylynn’s strategy.

Marylynn did not have unlimited hours to spend focusing on finding her next L&D role. In fact, because of her current full-time job, she only had about an hour a day (and sometimes less) to dedicate to her career transition.

We worked out a plan for Marylynn’s first 30 days that focused about 80 percent on alignment and about 10 percent each on community and development. The resulting time allocation typically looked like this:

- Total time: 1 hour/day (7 hours total)
 - Alignment: 5.5 hours
 - Community: 30–60 minutes
 - Development: 30–60 minutes

Once she was confident in her alignment, we shifted her strategy to focus more on branding. Marylynn’s success code allotment shifted accordingly to about 75 percent branding, 10 percent development, and 5 percent for alignment and community:

- Total time: 1 hour/day (7 hours total)
 - Branding: 5.25 hours
 - Development: 30–60 minutes
 - Alignment: 20–30 minutes
 - Community: 20–30 minutes

As you can see from Marylynn's example, using the success codes to properly allot your most precious career transition resource—your time—will help you unlock success in a quicker, more streamlined fashion.

How to Use This Book

In this book, I've labeled each chapter with the corresponding success codes so you can focus on the areas that feel most aligned to you, when you need them most. However, depending on where you are in your journey, there are a few different ways to maximize this book's effectiveness. Let's look closer at how this book can help you achieve your L&D career goals when you're in different stages of the journey:

- **You're currently in a passive job search or just starting to think about what's next for you and your L&D career.** If you have an elongated timeframe (more than six months) or no timeframe, I encourage you to read this book from start to finish. Each concept and chapter builds on the next; by going in order and practicing the activities, you'll create an incredibly strong launch pad on which you can ignite your engine and go after your dream L&D role.
- **You're actively searching for your next L&D role and need a bit of a jump start.** If you've already dipped your toes into the L&D job market, it's a great time to revisit your answers to the questions from earlier in this chapter to identify a good starting point. Once you determine how to allocate your time, I encourage you to seek out the chapters for the relevant success codes and apply the best practices you learn in each.
- **You're deep in the trenches and need to land your next L&D role ASAP!** Before you let the desperation sink all the way in, first and foremost, take a deep breath. Once you've done that, take inventory of what you've done and what's moved the needle for you (for example, landing interviews from referrals, receiving a cold message from a recruiter on LinkedIn, or moving on to a second-round interview). How can you amplify what's already working? For example, if your referrals have led to interviews, you may want to start by leaning into

the community success code before diving into something else. Once you amplify what is working, you can take inventory of what isn't and shift your focus to those success codes.

What's Next? Getting Started

A few things to reflect on as we embark on this L&D career journey together:

- Have you been operating strategically from a place of alignment? Or have you been combining piecemeal snippets of advice from person after person?
- What success code do you think needs the most attention? Which ones come next and at what approximate percentage?
- What is your timeframe for finding a new career? Based on your sense of urgency, how should you start or reframe your journey?



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About the Author



Sarah Cannistra is a learning and development leader and career coach dedicated to helping others grow in the field. She began her career in real estate sales, where she thrived in understanding clients' needs and guiding them to their perfect homes. As she moved into management, Sarah discovered an even greater passion—coaching and developing people. She

built training programs and learning resources for her team, finding deep fulfillment in their growth. Her career path shifted entirely when she attended a leadership development session and realized that facilitating learning was the work she was meant to do. That moment led to her first role in L&D—offered to her on the spot—despite having no formal background in the field.

Less than two years later, Sarah became the director of corporate training for an organization of more than 2,500 employees. Since then, she has led the learning function at five organizations across real estate, retail, tech, consulting, and healthcare. She's created hundreds of training programs, hired more than 100 L&D practitioners, and served more than 20,000 learners. Since 2020—through coaching, courses, and communities—she has helped more than 1,000 people transition into L&D careers, guiding them to find, land, and grow in roles they love.

Sarah is also the host of *The L&D Career Club Podcast*, a top 200 career podcast dedicated to helping professionals break into and thrive in the L&D field.

She lives in Austin, Texas, with her husband, Brandon, and their two dogs, Susie and Gail.



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